

Worth and Value in 21st-Century Parks: The Critical Role of Public Financing

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THE FUNDAMENTAL DIFFERENCE BETWEEN THE AMERICAN MODEL of the “public park or pleasuring ground” from its European antecedent, the royal hunting preserve, lies in the simple fact that access is not limited to the privileged.

It should be our lasting goal to keep it that way, even as we provide for the perpetuation of these special places that collectively represent the national heritage of a great nation.

When any significant share of our populace thinks the value of the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge lies in what we can personally consume, rather than what can broaden our lives and represent the diversity of our inheritance, we have exposed these people too little, not too much.

Our national refuges and national forests have different missions from that of the national parks, yet our missions complement one another. It is essential to remember that if our refuges and our forests are in jeopardy, our parks soon will follow. It really is a divide-and-conquer strategy.

This is my view of how and why those parks should be sustained. It has implications for other land managers, too, even as it addresses the worth and worthiness of parks.

The parks shoulder competing worries: Park funding is nowhere near matching park needs. Meanwhile, the profile of public users fails to match that of the American public itself.

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The parks see too few of the youth, the minorities and, yes, the immigrants in our midst. They are the core of the future tax base of America—the ones who can benefit from parks today and provide benefit to parks tomorrow.

I believe in public largesse; donors large and small who give of time, tools, money, and property are wonderful. Realistically, however, voluntary support is notoriously unstable. Personal priorities change as the givers encounter competing needs. A giver dies and her heirs may not care about her cause. His beloved cousin develops cancer and he redirects his giving to oncology research. Parks need reliable, continuing support. Congress, alone, has the power to make that happen.

To a lesser extent, I believe in a user-pays model that encourages those who most directly benefit to shoulder a disproportionate share of direct management costs. Ultimately, however, I believe no prospective park visitor should be turned away because of costs—and rising fees have a concurrently rising tendency to deflect more and more of the public, especially those we already underserve. Cost has no place as a barrier to access or appreciation.

That model does belong with the special services—lodging, restaurants, boat ramps, horse rides—that are useful, yet not part of the core value and experience of a park. Stephen Mather himself saw that government could not, and should not, compete with private business models for such services and facilities. Concession services were born of that vision.

We wring our hands over a visiting population that does not reflect the youth and diversity of America. We can excuse some of the imbalance simply because young Americans of any background have more pressures on their time and money. They're busy working two jobs—per household and often per person—paying off student loans, raising families, keeping roofs overhead and more on budgets that are likely smaller than those of the people who have more experience and more free time.

But fees have a pernicious impact on that smaller income of a budding career. They impose an additional barrier on precisely those who can best learn from the values parks represent—those who can use parks to strengthen their identity as equal participants in a uniquely shared partnership with their government.

Fees speak. They say parks belong to those who can pay—if you can't afford it, it isn't for you.

The irony, of course, is that the fees we do charge cannot touch the needs we have. They simulate the worth of a commodity without supporting the costs of an experience.

Total entrance and users fee revenues across our national park system account for a small share of the Park Service's total budget. We're trading a sliver of park operating budgets so that we can exclude the people who stand to learn the most from them.

Never has America been more in need of her parks. Our schools are raising their emphasis on science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) curricula and testing. Meanwhile, old-fashioned history, art appreciation, even physical education fall aside as our

youth lose connection with the continuum of contemplation and consideration, human history and governance.

Our parks are ideal classrooms and laboratories for teaching the glorious, untidy progress of our people, their management, and their values. I'm old enough to remember civics classes. Our parks have become the civics classrooms of the 21st century. Civics is the foundation of an active, informed populace. Our citizenry deserves those lessons.

Access, unfettered, is our opportunity to expose our own people to the genius of Thomas Edison, the determination of César Chávez, the courage of Lewis and Clark, the steadfastness of homesteaders, the compassion of Emma Lazarus, the vision of John Muir, and the commitment of warriors in service to our freedoms.

Entry, without barriers, opens the vistas of great mountain parks, the pounding waters of our seashores, the lush landscapes of the Everglades, the silent expanse of the Mojave, and the stunning geology of places as disparate as Wind Cave, Craters of the Moon, and Canyonlands—each with an earned place in the growth and development of a system that treasures the many faces of our human and natural history.

Fees alienate our citizenry from their legacy.

They limit who can benefit by experiencing firsthand the natural and historical heritage that make America unique. Fees are a minimal barrier to most who reach remote Yellowstone or the great parks of Alaska, but the majority of our park areas actually lie within easy reach of urban populations, for whom an admission fee must often be balanced against child-care costs or household expenses. Even the remote parks have neighbors—neighbors who too often cannot see for themselves the memorable features and lasting lessons that can be found within.

The touchstones of America we save and share make our parks transcend ephemeral visits to theme parks, movie houses, or baseball games. Their mere existence inspires even those who may never climb Denali, hike the Appalachian Trail, visit the Statue of Liberty, or ponder the meaning of war while walking a historic battleground.

Vanderbilt Mansion, Manzanar, and Antietam each teach. Remote Devils Postpile and Isle Royale instruct in ways that parallel the lessons of the accessible Mount Rainier and Delaware Water Gap.

Fees sufficient to maintain parks at a reasonable base standard only work when large visitor numbers are coupled with high fees. The attractive values of most parks are too subtle to attract both. Worthy? Unquestionably. Exciting? Parks are not for an adrenaline rush, even though some will give that, too.

Even the most spectacular and popular parks, Yosemite and Great Smoky Mountains, for example, might be able to approach self-supporting income, but these are not compact amusement parks where the marginally fit can reach every attractive or edifying feature with a short walk or a tram ride, where \$80 brings a family a day or two of non-stop fun, where

the interaction is driven by mercantile management, not a drive for exposure to a heritage or a thirst for learning about a legacy.

Parks are not commodities to be bought by those who can afford the experience. In 1837, when landscape artist George Catlin first proposed the idea of a grand public park, a concept was born that would take flower in our earliest parks in the latter half of the 19th century. We recognized as a nation that certain places exemplified grandeur and others embraced unmatched natural assets of biology and geology.

Our drive to set aside hallowed battlegrounds and places associated with our most revered leaders evolved into an effort to represent the broad scope of American history through physical pieces maintained for successive generations who had not lived those experiences, but could call them up at the places we chose to represent the multiple realities of a many-faceted history.

The inventory, I might add, does not yet fully reflect the most notable of those facets. The legacy is incomplete. Each day, we re-assess the meaning and value of aspects of the forces that shaped our land and her people. I expect that job will never be complete.

I would extend to interpretive programs the same freedom from price that I would grant the parks themselves. It is through those programs that we open the park resource to the public's understanding. Moreover, interpretation shifts the experience itself from voyeurism to participation—precisely the interaction so craved by our electronic generation.

A nation that finds resources to prop up governments in some places and chop them down in others also has the resources to better protect and present this sampling of what makes the United States special among the community of nations.

We can afford it. We have been choosing, politically, not to do so.

The impulse to preserve the best places is fully appropriate, no matter how shabbily our government chooses to treat them—and it is Congress that holds the purse strings. Not only do the parks not get what they need, they are restricted and directed on how to use what they get. Shabby is unjust for the best of America.

The park deficits are huge when compared to a single household budget, of course. But we could fully fund every shortfall, every unmet need, without denting any of our government's largest programs. The question is not "Can we do it?" The question is "When will we do it?"

Park history is littered with fits and starts at providing necessary support. We had the CCC of the 1930s to thank for much essential infrastructure. Mission 66 let us regain our footing in the years following World War II and Korea. The centennial of the Civil War, bicentennial of America's revolution, key anniversaries of parks like Yellowstone and the Statue of Liberty have spurred selective investment. It's time to commit ourselves to making our parks whole, then keeping them that way for the public they serve—and honor.

We don't pay for access to our right to vote and we shouldn't pay for access to our right to understand. That some may decline makes that access no less important for those who accept.

Simple citizenship makes us stakeholders in the special places that have been set aside as the exemplars and benchmarks of a great country.

Don't sell our parks—whole or by increments.

Save our parks for our people. Let them in. Let them learn. Let them return. For free!

Over a 41-year career with the National Park Service, all of it in the Washington office, **Duncan Morrow** spent 28 years talking to reporters and another 13 in which speech-writing was his primary duty. He worked with 12 of the 18 directors the Park Service has ever had, and knew well two of those who left before his career began. His job mostly meant articulating official and personal views of others; here, he has the pleasure of speaking for himself.